

## Message Text

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PAGE 01 BEIRUT 04451 071916Z

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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3753

INFO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

S E C R E T BEIRUT 4451

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE

SUBJECT: LBA NESE VIEWS ON ASAD'S CURRENT POSITION

REF: DAMASCUS 1146

1. DURING COURSE OF LENGTHY TOUR D'HORIZON LAST WEEK WITH BOUTROS DIB, PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER, HE MENTIONED IN PASSING HIS CONCERN RE PRESIDENT ASAD'S POSITION IN SYRIA. I EXPRESSED INTEREST AND HE SAID THAT HE WAS DEEPLY CONCERNED THAT PRESIDENT ASAD WAS IN AN EXTREMELY DIFFICULT POSTION VIS-A-VIS THE SUNNIS. I DID NOT, OF COURSE, CITE REFTEL BUT I SAID THE IMPRESSION I HAD FROM MY DIPLOMATIC COLLEAGUES HERE WERE ALSO ACCREDITED TO DAMASCUS WAS THAT ASAD WAS PRETTY MUCH MASTER OF THE SITUATION. DDB REPLIED THAT THIS WAS THE CASE IN DAMASCUS BUT ONE SHOULD NOT FORGET THE REST OF THE COUNTRY. HE CITED, FOR ESAMPLE, THAT APPROXIMATELY THREE AND A HALF WEEKS AGO TROUBLE HAD ARISEN BETWEEN PRESIDENT ASAD AND HIS BROTHER, RAFA'AT. LATTER HAD RESIGNED HIS COMMISSION AND WITH THAT, SOME OF THE TROOPS IN PROVINCIAL GARRISONS STARTED MARCHING ON DAMASCUS. ASAD APPEALED TO HIS BROTHER TO RESUME HIS COMMAND AND THE MATTER WAS SETTLED. THE SYRIANS HAVE BEEN HOLDING THIS EXTREMELY CLOSELY. DIB OPINED THAT

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SECRET

PAGE 02 BEIRUT 04451 071916Z

AS IN EGYPT, BUT NOT QUITE AS SERIOUSLY, THE SYRIAN

COUNTRYSIDE ECONOMY IS NOT AS AFFLUENT AS ONE MIGHT HOPE AND IS CERTAINLY NOT AS WELL OFF AS THAT OF THE DAMASCENES. THIS HAS SERVED TO INCITE TRADITIONAL SUNNI-ALAOUIE ENMITIES, PARTICULARLY AS THE LATTER ARE ASSOCIATED, AT LEAST IN THE SUNNIS'S MINDS, WITH URBAN AREAS. THE IRAQI BAATH ARE ALSO ACTIVE AMONG THE SUNNIS AND DIB CANNOT CURRENTLY GAUGE THE DEGREE OF THEIR SUCCESS IN STIRRING THEM UP. HE SAID, HOWEVER, HE HOPES TO GO TO SYRIA SHORTLY TO GIVE A SERIES OF LECTURES AT THE DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY AND AT THAT TIME WILL BE ABLE BETTER TO TAKE THE LOCAL POLITICAL TEMPERATURE.

2. SUBSEQUENTLY IN OUR CONVERSATION, DIB DWELT AT SOME LENGTH ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A PREEMPTIVE ISRAELI ATTACK AGAINST SYRIA. I SAID THAT PERSONALLY I DID NOT SHARE THIS CONCERN, TO WHICH HE RESPONDED THAT HE ASSUMED THE ISRAELIS WERE FULLY AWARE OF THE POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES OF PRESIDENT ASAD AND MIGHT RECKON THAT A PREEMPTIVE ATTACK DESTROYING THE SYRIAN MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT WOULD THEN RESULT IN A NATIONAL UPRISING AGAINST THE CURRENT REGIME AND AN ENSUING BLOOD BATH. I TOLD DIB THIS SEEMED TO ME A BIT FARTHEIVED BUT HE SAID MANY LEBANESE SHARED THIS CONCERN. THERE ARE MANY HOLES, OF COURSE, THAT ONE COULD PUNCH IN DIB'S THINKING RE A PREEMPTIVE ATTACK, BUT IT IS AN INDICATION OF THINKING OF SOME RATHER INTELLIGENT LEBANESE.  
GODLEY

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